

Breast Swelling

Self Management and Advice



Swelling in the breast or chest area (sometimes called breast oedema) is very common after having breast surgery or radiotherapy.

Sometimes, this swelling will settle down without any treatment however, in some cases breast swelling can become a chronic (long-lasting) condition called breast lymphoedema. Early treatment for breast swelling can make a big difference to the risk of long-term lymphoedema.

Who Can Get Breast Swelling?

Breast swelling can happen in anyone who has had breast surgery or radiotherapy. Breast swelling is more likely to persist if you have had:

Lymph nodes removed from the underarm (sentinel node biopsy or axillary clearance).

Radiotherapy to the breast or lymph nodes near your collarbone, breastbone or underarm.

An infection in your breast or underarm during or after surgery/radiotherapy.

How Do I Know if I Have Breast Swelling?

Breast swelling does not always mean the affected breast is bigger than the other side, especially with so many changes after surgery. Your specialist or lymphoedema practitioner can often see subtle signs of breast swelling that you may be completely unaware of. Common signs and symptoms of breast swelling include:



A feeling of “heaviness” or “fullness” on the affected side compared to the other breast.



A pink colour, particularly in the lower part of the breast, that does not go away when the radiotherapy skin reaction has settled.



Dimpling or “orange peel” look to the skin of the breast. The skin in this area may also feel thick compared to the other breast.



Deeper indentations from bra seams and bands on the affected side, compared to the other breast.

What Do I Do About My Breast Swelling?



If you have experienced any of the symptoms above or have been told by your specialist or cancer nurse that you have breast swelling/breast oedema, it is recommended that you see a lymphoedema practitioner for advice that is specific to you and the timeframe in your treatment journey.

Below is some general advice that can help to get you started. This should not replace specific advice you have been given from your cancer treatment team.

Skin Care

Always follow the advice of your radiotherapy team about what skin care products to use during your radiotherapy treatment. After radiotherapy has finished and the skin reaction has settled, continue to moisturise the skin in the treatment area at least once a day.

Wear a Supportive Bra

It is recommended to avoid wearing an underwire bra while your skin heals after radiotherapy to avoid friction and skin breakdown. Features of a bra that will help with breast swelling include:

- **A wide elastic chest band that does not roll up:** The chest band should be firm (does not slide up as you lift your arms overhead) but not too tight.
- **High side-coverage:** A wide panel on the side of the chest gives better support to the outside of the breast.
- **Good containment in the cup:** each breast should be encased in its cup and completely covered. If there is a significant cup-size difference, a prosthetic fitting may be recommended for optimal support.

For general tips to check how well your bra fits see: bra.edu.au

Self-Lymphatic Drainage Massage

Massage can help direct built-up fluid towards your lymph nodes and reduce the degree of swelling. General advice is below; however, the pattern of fluid drainage can be different between individuals and a lymphoedema practitioner can give you more specific advice. Lymphatic massage can be applied with generous moisturiser if a radiotherapy skin reaction is still present, and you will be directed on this by your cancer treatment team. Never massage over a skin area that is blistering, peeling or infected.

1. Massage in circles in the hollow of your underarm on the side of swelling x 10 sec.
2. Raise your arms overhead as you take a deep breath in. Breathe out and lower your arms. Repeat x 10 breaths.
3. Use slow, firm pressure with the flat of your hand to massage the side of your chest/ribcage up towards your underarm. Repeat x 20 strokes.
4. Use slow, firm pressure with the flat of your hand to massage the outside half of your breast up towards your underarm. Repeat x 20 strokes.
5. Use slow, firm pressure with the flat of your hand to massage the inside half of your breast up towards your breast bone/away towards the other side of your chest. Repeat x 20 strokes.
6. Perform this massage at least once per day.



Our **specialist lymphoedema physiotherapists** at **Gosford Oncology Physiotherapy and Massage**, can give you advice and treatment strategies specific to your breast swelling. This may include Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD) massage, prescription of lymphatic bras, and scar therapy for surgical scars and radiation-induced fibrosis. We will also provide risk-assessment, surveillance and treatment for possible arm lymphoedema related to breast cancer treatment as part of our Early Intervention Breast Cancer Rehabilitation program.